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# Variation in the Expression of Possession by Latino Children: Social Factors

# Variation in the Expression of Possession by Latino Children: Social Factors

Tonya E. Wolford

## 1 Introduction

This report of possessive structures in Latino<sup>1</sup> children relies on the sociolinguistic study of spontaneous speech and looks at the effects of multiple social and linguistic factors on the production of several linguistic variables. Three types of English language possessives were considered: 3<sup>rd</sup> person possessive pronouns; periphrastic *of* possessives; and attributive *-s* possessives. It was found that the Latino children confused *his* for *her* and *her* for *his*, as in (1); used periphrastic *of* constructions more than native English speakers, as in (2); and omitted the attributive *-s* marker, as in (3).

- (1) ...my mother's not going to go work – tomorrow *his day off*.  
(=her day off)
- (2) ...and the *friend of my brother* brought it back.  
(=my brother's friend)
- (3) ...like when I go to my *cousin house*. (=cousin's house)

The deviations from other English dialects seen in these examples are consistent with contrastive analyses of English and Spanish. Specifically, the pattern evident in (1) is generally considered a feature common to non-native English speakers from Spanish language backgrounds. In such constructions, it is believed that the pronoun is selected to agree with the possession, or noun that follows, instead of the possessor (Hill and Bradford 2000:111). As Whitley states, 'in Spanish one rarely uses a noun without marking its gender, thanks to the required agreement of modifiers' (Whitley 2002:148). The periphrastic *of* construction in (2) is common to Spanish speakers learning English, as the syntax of such constructions mirrors the most common form in Spanish for expressing possession (Whitley 2002:153-154), shown in Example (4).

- (4) el libro de Juan (the book of Juan/Juan's book)

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<sup>1</sup>The term *Latino* is used here to refer to children of Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Mexican-American descent.

What follows from this idea about Spanish-speaking English language learners is that they should show a greater dependence on the periphrastic form and, as a consequence, the attributive possessive construction in Example (3) should be less common (Fernández Domínguez 2000:134).

A contrastive analysis also tells us that when the attributive construction in (3) is used, there is no reason to expect a high rate of absence of the *-s*, which is a feature generally seen in African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Baugh 1983:94-97; Labov et al. 1968:169) and English first language acquisition (Brown 1973:335-337). Further, it actually has been proposed that possessive *-s* should be easily acquired by Spanish-speaking English language learners because Spanish syntax enclitic formation is similar. Fernández Domínguez (2000:91) states: "The status of the English genitive as a clitic should certainly cause no major problems to the native speakers of Spanish, since they should be used to the frequent use of clitic elements in their own language, where, for instance, a syntactically independent direct object pronoun can enclitically merge with an intransitive verb, other than the verb that governs it, and behave, from an orthographic and phonological point of view, as a suffix: *Podrían estarlo construyendo sin permiso* (They can be it building without permission)."

## 2 Participants

In the 2001-2002 school year, spontaneous speech samples were collected from 630 elementary school children in Atlanta, Philadelphia and several cities in California. The present study included speech samples from 61 Latino children who learned to read in Spanish (referred to here as Latino Spanish) and 65 who learned to read in English (Latino English),<sup>2</sup> and a comparison group of 28 African-American and 28 white children.

All study participants were enrolled in elementary schools where 65 percent or more of the student body qualified for the federal low or reduced lunch program. All of the children were below reading grade level, and many of them participated in bilingual education programs. The children were evenly distributed between the language groups, boys and girls, and among the second, third and fourth grades. The number of children coming from the three cities was not evenly distributed, however, with more children in the

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<sup>2</sup>While all of the Latino children spoke English, the two Latino groups represent different types of bilingualism, where the Latino Spanish group learned to read in Spanish and the Latino English group was exposed to English instruction in the earlier grades. Details about their early academic experiences were not, however, solicited from the children, who were just asked which language did they learn to read in.

study cohort coming from California overall, and within each subgroup. A detailed distribution of the children is shown in Table 1.

		Atlanta N (%)	California N (%)	Philadelphia N (%)	Total N (%)
Group	Latino Spanish	14 (23)	24 (39)	23 (38)	61 (48)
	Latino English	10 (15)	34 (52)	21 (32)	65 (52)
Sex	Girls	14 (22)	28 (44)	21 (33)	63 (50)
	Boys	10 (16)	30 (48)	23 (37)	63 (50)
Grade	Second	8 (19)	20 (48)	14 (33)	42 (33)
	Third	7 (16)	19 (43)	18 (41)	44 (35)
	Fourth	9 (23)	19 (48)	12 (30)	40 (32)
Total		24 (19)	58 (46)	44 (35)	126

Table 1: Distribution of Latino Study Participants

### 3 Data Collection

Part-time tutors collected the speech samples. They received minimal training in the methods of sociolinguistic interviewing and were provided with a question guide to assist them in the interview process. The types of questions used to elicit speech from the children included items like: "Did you ever do something that your mom told you not to do?", "Have you ever gotten blamed for something that you didn't do?", and "Do you know any place that's really scary?"

The interviews lasted 30 minutes to 1 hour and were recorded on Sony mini-disk recorders. The quality and quantity of the speech samples was variable, as would be expected with 8 to 10 year-old children. Some children were not really forthcoming, while others continued to talk whether prompted or not. Approximately 170,000 words were transcribed, for an average of about 1,300 words per child. Despite an equal number of boys and girls, the number of words for each was 75,000 and 95,000, respectively, with girls producing, on average, 300 more words per interview than boys.

### 4 Third Person Possessive Pronoun Confusion

The variables considered for the analysis of third person possessive pronouns were those used to mark possession in *pronoun + noun* constructions in-

volving the 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns *his* and *her*. All instances of *his* + *noun* and *her* + *noun* were identified. The distribution of third person possessive pronoun tokens by speaker sex and pronoun choice is shown in Table 2.

	Other Pronoun	Expected Pronoun	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Girls	62 (14)	377 (86)	439 (67)
Boys	19 (9)	193 (91)	212 (33)
Total	81 (12)	570 (88)	651

Table 2: Expected and Other Pronoun by Sex for Latino Children

The rate for pronoun confusion is 12 percent overall, which is sufficiently common to warrant further investigation. Also, while the number of boys and girls in the cohort is almost equal, the girls used twice as many third person possessive pronouns as the boys. This is not surprising as it has been shown that female discourse is characterized by more talk about people than male discourse, which is more focused on things (Macaulay 2005:129-138).<sup>3</sup> In his study of adults and adolescents in Glasgow, Macaulay found that the proportion of talk about people was 64 percent for the girls compared to 24 percent for the boys. The adolescent girls also showed a much higher rate of use for the personal pronoun *she*, and adult women used a higher rate of both *he* and *she* in their conversations.

In order to explore the possible social and linguistic influences on pronoun confusion, a multivariate analysis using GoldVarb 2.0 on the Macintosh was conducted. The dependent variable was use of incorrect pronoun (*his* when *her* was expected, or vice versa). The factor groups shown in Table 3 were selected as contributing significantly ( $p=0.035$ ) to pronoun confusion. These findings confirm that pronoun confusion is more likely when the pronoun agrees with the Spanish translation of the noun, as shown in Example (5), where *name* in Spanish is a masculine noun and the pronoun *his* is selected instead of *her*.

- (5) His name is Jacqueline.

<sup>3</sup>Also see: Eggins and Slade (1997), Holmes (1997), Johnstone (1990), Kipers (1987), Lippa (1998), and Nordenstam (1992).

Factor Group	Factor	% Pronoun Confusion	Total N	Factor Weight
Location	Atlanta	22	250	0.64
	California	8	206	0.50
	Philadelphia	5	195	0.33
Grade	2 <sup>nd</sup>	21	178	0.66
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	7	272	0.44
	4 <sup>th</sup>	12	201	0.44
Group	Latino Spanish	19	278	0.64
	Latino English	8	373	0.40
Expected pronoun	Her	17	304	0.58
	His	8	347	0.43
Agreement in Spanish	Agreement	16	377	0.61
	No agreement	7	274	0.35

Not significant: Sex (boys/girls)

Table 3: Varbrul Results I: Third Person Pronoun Confusion

There are also some interesting group differences shown here. Firstly, pronoun confusion is more likely to occur in the Latino Spanish children, who learned to read in Spanish first. Further, there is a developmental effect, with 2<sup>nd</sup> graders more likely to confuse pronouns. In terms of geographical distribution, Atlanta favors pronoun confusion, California is neutral, and Philadelphia favors correct pronoun use. This distribution suggested a difference between Mexican-origin and Puerto Rican-origin children, which was explored by recoding the data to include Spanish language origin plus sex as a factor group. Factors were created for Mexican boys and girls by combining Atlanta and California data, and for Puerto Rican boys and girls based on the Philadelphia data. The new Varbrul results (Table 4) show that it is actually the Mexican origin females who are responsible for the greater part of gender confusion. The effects of learning to read in Spanish and pronoun and noun agreement continued to be favoring factors, as did the developmental effect. Of particular interest, however, is the sharp split between Mexican and Puerto Rican origin females, with the first group favoring pronoun confusion and the latter group disfavoring it. The factor weights for both male groups are in the neutral range and the difference between the two is not significant. The re-organization of the data uncovered interaction between speaker sex and language origin, which is quite striking, though not easily accounted for.

Factor Group	Factor	% Confusion	Total N	Factor Weight
Language Origin	Mex origin female	18	321	0.67
	PR origin male	9	77	0.53
	Mex origin male	9	135	0.41
	PR origin female	3	118	0.17
Grade	2 <sup>nd</sup>	21	178	0.70
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	7	272	0.45
	4 <sup>th</sup>	12	201	0.40
Group	Latino Spanish	19	278	0.67
	Latino English	8	373	0.37
Spanish Agreement	Agreement	16	377	0.61
	No agreement	7	274	0.35

Not significant: expected pronoun (*his/her*)

Table 4: Varbrul Results II: Third Person Pronoun Confusion

## 5 Use of Periphrastic *of* Versus Attributive *-s*

The variables used in the analysis of periphrastic *of* were *noun* + *of* + *noun* constructions that could be expressed as *noun* + *-s* + *noun* (or *noun* + *noun* when the *-s* is not expressed), as in Example 6.

- (6) ...he got *the gun of the bad guy*./...he got *the bad guy's gun*.

There are many factors that may affect the choice of one or the other form, including topicality of the possessor [ $\pm$ topical], animacy of the possessor [ $\pm$ animate], and the nature of the possession relation [ $\pm$ prototypical]. In a recent study of U.S. and British English, Rosenbach (2002) found that the most influential factors affecting the choice of periphrastic *of* over attributive *-s* were of an [-animate] and [-topical] possessor, and a [-prototypical] possessive relation, as in *the fumes of a car* compared to *a car's fumes*. The preferred environment for the attributive possessive involved a [+animate] and [+topical] possessor, and a [+prototypical] possessive relation.

The possessive categories included in the present study are based on three main types identified by Rosenbach (2002): real possessives, subjective possessives, and objective possessives. Real possessives describe an intimate relationship, often involving parts of a whole, as in *John's arm* or *the arm of John*. Real possessives also express actual possession, as in, *the girl's dog* or *the dog of the girl*. Subjective possessives imply a transitory or abstract relationship, as in, *the pool's clarity* or *the clarity of the pool*. And finally, ob-



jective possessives do not signal actual possession, but the two nouns are none-the-less closely related, as in, *Mary's murder* or *the murder of Mary*.

The rates for periphrastic *of* compared to attributive *-s* for all groups are shown in Table 5. Both the Latino Spanish and Latino English groups had a significantly higher rate of periphrastic *of* than the African-American group (chi-square,  $p < 0.001$ ). The Latino Spanish group had a significantly higher rate of periphrastic *of* than the white group (chi-square,  $p = 0.0028$ ), but was not significantly different from the Latino English group.

Group	Percentage (Number/Total)
African American	1 (1/153)
White	8 (9/111)
Latino Spanish	21 (23/111)
Latino English	12 (19/159)

Table 5: Use of Periphrastic *of* Compared to Attributive *-s* for All Groups

An initial Varbrul run was done to evaluate the selection of *of* compared to *-s* for all groups. The dependent variable was *of* as opposed to *-s*. The factor groups that were selected as contributing significantly ( $p = 0.009$ ) to periphrastic *of* use are shown in Table 6.

Factor Group	Factor	Percentage <i>of</i> vs. <i>-s</i>	Total N	Factor Weight
Location	Atlanta	10	240	0.59
	California	13	157	0.58
	Philadelphia	4	137	0.27
Group	Latino Spanish	21	111	0.88
	Latino English	12	159	0.62
	White	8	111	0.53
	African American	1	153	0.12
	Not human	46	57	0.92
Possessor human	Human	5	477	0.43

Not significant: sex (boys/girls); grade level (2<sup>nd</sup> grade/3<sup>rd</sup> grade/ 4<sup>th</sup> grade); possession animacy (animate/inanimate), possession relation (alienable/inalienable)

Table 6: Varbrul Results I: *of* Compared to *-s* for All Groups

The result for the third factor group is in line with our current understanding of the selection of the periphrastic form over the attributive form, which is preferred when the possessor is [-animate], as mentioned above. Further, it was the Latino Spanish children who favored periphrastic *of*, as did the La-

tino English children.

In an initial exploration of the preference for periphrasis by the Latino children, the author conducted a review of the constructions produced by them. As mentioned above, many factors are involved in the selection of periphrastic *of* versus attributive *-s* and it is difficult to determine what is actually different about the Latino children's constructions. Accordingly, it was concluded that a first step was to have the constructions rated as "native", "native-like", or "non-native" in a pilot grammaticality study involving native English speakers. Preliminary results show that the Latino children's utterances were considered 'non-native' more often than those of the other speakers. More details on the grammaticality of the utterances will be reported at a later time.

In the initial Varbrul run for only the Latino children the factor groups that were selected as contributing significantly ( $p=0.04$ ) to *of* use are shown in Table 7. These data demonstrate more clearly that the children from California and Atlanta are equally likely to favor the periphrastic construction compared to the children from Philadelphia, as was the case with pronoun confusion. Accordingly, the data were again re-organized to include a Spanish language origin plus sex factor group. In the second Varbrul run for the Latino groups (Table 8), two factor groups were selected as significant ( $p=0.009$ ). The factor weights for these factors confirm that periphrastic *of* is a feature preferred by Mexican origin girls as compared to the Puerto Rican children in general. Mexican origin boys are neutral and Puerto Rican males did not use the periphrastic *of* construction at all, hence the knockout category. Further, learning to read in Spanish clearly contributes to a preference for this form.

Factor Group	Factor	Percentage <i>of</i> vs. <i>-s</i>	Total N	Factor Weight
Location	Atlanta	22	92	0.66
	California	19	94	0.63
	Philadelphia	5	84	0.21
Sex	Girls	18	174	0.57
	Boys	10	96	0.37
Group	Latino Spanish	21	111	0.65
	Latino English	12	159	0.40

Not significant: grade level (2<sup>nd</sup> grade/3<sup>rd</sup> grade/ 4<sup>th</sup> grade)

Table 7: Varbrul Results II: *of* vs. *-s* for Latino Groups

Factor Group	Factor	Percentage <i>of vs. -s</i>	Total N	Factor Weight
Language				
Origin	Mex origin female	23	120	0.64
	Mex origin male	15	66	0.48
	PR origin female	7	54	0.25
	PR origin male	0	30	knockout
Group	Latino Spanish	21	111	0.64
	Latino English	12	159	0.40

Not significant: grade level (2<sup>nd</sup> grade/3<sup>rd</sup> grade/ 4<sup>th</sup> grade)

Table 8: Varbrul Results III: *of vs. -s* for Latino Groups

What might have been considered a Spanish-language feature has proven to be quite variable among the Spanish speakers in the cohort. This is not to say that the parallels between Spanish and English are not related to an increased reliance on the periphrastic *of* possessive, but being Latino by no means guarantees an over-generalization of this construction. It may be that the different histories of bilingualism and English contact of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans has contributed to differing patterns in Spanish influence. For example, the use of English as the official language in Puerto Rico has afforded Puerto Ricans more opportunity for English contact (Zentella 2000:137-138). Further, in areas with high concentrations of Mexican origin Spanish speakers (in particular in the Southwest), Spanish continues to be used in the home more than for most other groups for whom English is a second language (Alba et al. 2002). There are also different patterns of *-s* treatment in the Spanish of the two groups, with Puerto Ricans allowing *-s* elision freely (Poplack 1980), which is not generally associated with Mexican Spanish. The preference on the part of Puerto Rican origin males for the attributive construction will be considered now by looking more closely at the use of attributive *-s*.

## 6 Attributive *-s* Absence

With the attributive *-s* construction, absence of the possessive *-s* marker also varies among children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Absence of attributive *-s* is well documented in the African American community (Baugh 1983:94-97; Labov et al. 1968:169; Labov and Harris 1989:11-12; Rickford 1992:185-186), and occurs at a rate of over 70 percent for the Afri-

can-American children in the present study (Table 9). Interestingly, it also seems to be a feature common to the Latino children. As compared to the white children, there were significantly higher rates of *-s* absence among the Latino Spanish (chi-square,  $p=0.0001$ ) and Latino English (chi-square,  $p=0.002$ ) groups.

Group	Percentage (Number/Total)
African American	73 (111/153)
White	4 (4/102)
Latino Spanish	26 (23/88)
Latino English	19 (27/140)

Table 9: Absence of Attributive *-s* for All Groups

An initial Varbrul run to assess these differences included five factor groups, with *-s* absence as the dependent variable. The factor groups selected as contributing significantly ( $p=0.001$ ) to *-s* absence are shown in Table 10. The findings confirm what was already evident, which is that African Americans favor the absence of *-s*. We also see that there are regional differences, with Philadelphia being a favoring factor. Following segment did not significantly affect the model however, which suggests that we are dealing with a morphological rather than a phonological variable, as has been noted in other studies of the absence of *-s* in AAVE (Labov et al. 1968:170; Labov 1984: 147-150; Rickford 1992:186).

Factor Group	Factor	Percentage <i>-s</i> Absence	Total N	Factor Weight
Location	Philadelphia	41	131	0.68
	Atlanta	41	215	0.52
	California	17	137	0.31
Group	African American	73	153	0.88
	Latino Spanish	26	88	0.43
	Latino English	19	140	0.40
	White	4	102	0.10

Not significant: sex (boys/girls); grade (2<sup>nd</sup> grade/3<sup>rd</sup> grade/4<sup>th</sup> grade); following segment (consonant/vowel/liquid)

Table 10: Varbrul Results I: Absence of Attributive *-s* for All Groups

In the initial Varbrul analysis for the Latino children alone, two factor groups were selected as contributing significantly ( $p=0.04$ ) to *-s* absence (Table 11). Once again, we see a bigger difference between Philadelphia, on

the one hand, and Atlanta and California on the other, suggesting a Spanish language origin effect. But this time, boys favor the form over girls, and first language is not included. Data from a second Latino group Varbrul analysis including the language origin group are shown in Table 12. Spanish language origin plus sex is the only factor group selected as significant ( $p < 0.001$ ); the absence of attributive *-s* is clearly favored by the Puerto Rican boys, and to a lesser extent by the girls, but not likely among the Mexican girls.

Factor Group	Factor	Percentage -s Absence	Total N	Factor Weight
Location	Philadelphia	35	80	0.68
	Atlanta	15	72	0.42
	California	14	76	0.38
Sex	Boys	29	86	0.61
	Girls	18	142	0.43

Not significant: group (Latino Spanish/Latino English); grade (2<sup>nd</sup> grade/3<sup>rd</sup> grade/4<sup>th</sup> grade); following segment (consonant/vowel/liquid)

Table 11: Varbrul Results II: Absence of Attributive *-s* for Latino Groups

Factor Group	Factor	Percentage -s Absence	Total N	Factor Weight
Language Origin	PR origin male	50	30	0.80
	PR origin female	26	50	0.58
	Mex origin male	18	56	0.46
	Mex origin female	13	92	0.37

Not significant: group (Latino Spanish/Latino English); grade (2<sup>nd</sup> grade/3<sup>rd</sup> grade/4<sup>th</sup> grade); following segment (consonant/vowel/liquid)

Table 12: Varbrul Results III: Absence of Attributive *-s* for Latino Groups

## 7 Discussion

The present findings support a substrate effect that is clearly mediated by social and cognitive factors. While variation in the realization of these variables could be attributed to incomplete acquisition, the different sociolinguistic patterns for the different variables suggests otherwise. A relationship between the increased frequency of pronoun confusion and agreement in Spanish between the possessor pronoun and the possession noun was shown.

Such agreement was found in 75 percent of the cases of pronoun confusion. There is also a developmental effect evident in pronoun confusion, with an increased frequency found in the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders. This can be viewed in combination with the high level of salience of this feature, where the use of the incorrect pronoun might impede communication and cause misunderstandings, which underscores the difference between this and the other variables being studied. In the two cases where Spanish language influence was expected—pronoun confusion and periphrastic *of*—there was an increased occurrence of the non-standard form among the children who learned to read in Spanish first compared to those who learned to read in English. With possessive *-s* absence, there was no difference between these two groups, which contradicts the idea that attributive *-s* acquisition may be facilitated by Spanish structural similarities (Fernández Domínguez 2000).

The difference between boys and girls for two of the analyses was surprising, as was the interaction between speaker sex and language origin for all of the analyses. Most striking here is that a group of girls favored the use of periphrastic *of* and a group of boys favored absence of the attributive *-s*. An explanation for the preference of periphrastic *of* by the Mexican girls may lie in the fact that girls have closer ties to their homes, and less outside contact, which could limit their exposure to English. However, the same does not hold true for Puerto Rican girls, which could be due to the socio-cultural differences between the Latino groups. At the same time, the increased absence of attributive *-s* among the Puerto Rican boys, and to a lesser extent girls, suggests that there is a link between them and black street culture. Poplack (1978) first reported on Puerto Rican bilingual boys use of AAVE features in Philadelphia in the late 1970s. In this study, Poplack looked at the realization of six phonological variables in the speech of Puerto Rican bilingual children attending a Catholic high school in North Philadelphia that was 51 percent Puerto Rican, 46 percent white, and 3 percent black. The purpose of the study was to examine the acquisition of the local Philadelphia dialect compared to AAVE dialect features by the Puerto Rican bilinguals. The boys in the study not only showed a higher percentage of the AAVE variants than the girls, but also had significantly more AAVE use in casual compared to careful speech. In their discussion of segregation in Philadelphia, Labov and Harris (1986:12) showed that Philadelphia African American speech patterns also extend to Puerto Rican males in that city. Specifically, it was the Puerto Rican males linked to the African American community through marriage who showed higher rates of both verbal and possessive *-s*. An earlier study on assimilation by Wolfram (1974) found similar evidence of AAVE influence on Puerto Rican English in New York. Current, ongoing ethnographic and linguistic studies being conducted in



Philadelphia confirm that Puerto Ricans have a close relationship with local African Americans and, as a consequence, certainly have the opportunity to absorb their grammatical features and are doing so (Wolford, Evans, and Cakiades 2005).

Finally, the differences between the Mexican and Puerto Rican children are striking, beyond the differences between boys and girls noted above. The Mexican and Puerto Rican origin children are clearly divided in their use of both periphrastic *of* and absence of possessive *-s*. These findings point to a possible differentiation in Mexican or Mexican American and Puerto Rican English, with the later more and more being characterized by features of AAVE, with less apparent influence from Spanish. At the same time, the former group may continue to be subject to a broad number of influences as well, including Spanish language structures and forms.

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